

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 467 111

UD 035 195

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TITLE City and State Takeover as a School Reform Strategy. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, NY.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.; Mid-Atlantic Lab. for Student Success, Philadelphia, PA.
REPORT NO EDO-UD-02-3
ISSN ISSN-0889-8049
PUB DATE 2002-07-00
NOTE 4p.; Digest Number 174.
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0035
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027. Tel: 800-601-4868 (Toll Free); Tel: 212-678-3433; Fax: 212-678-4012; e-mail: eric-cue@columbia.edu. For full text: <http://web.tc.columbia.edu/pubget.asp?show=1>.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Accountability; Change Strategies; *Educational Change; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Low Achievement; Public Schools; Research Needs; School Districts; *Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *State Takeovers

ABSTRACT

This digest addresses city and state takeover as a school reform strategy, outlining the emergence of takeover in the past decade, discussing promises and limitations that takeover offers, and synthesizing the research to date on takeover's effectiveness. A notable trend over the past decade is greater implementation of takeover reforms, particularly during 1995-97. City/state takeover of school districts has the potential to turn around low-performing schools and districts, and it can hold schools and students accountable to systemwide standards. However, there are serious challenges to takeover success rooted in the potentially confrontational relationship between the city/state and school system. Research across takeover sites is insufficient. More research is needed that synthesizes findings from across takeover districts and identifies circumstances in which takeover succeeds or fails. One emerging strand of more systematic research by Wong and Shen (2001) examines 14 school districts where comprehensive takeovers are in place. The research examines the potential of takeover reform to impact three aspects of the school district: improving the quality of teacher and student performance, especially in the lowest performing schools; more effective financial and administrative management; and increasing accountability in order to improve public perception of the school district. (SM)

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**ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
Institute for Urban and Minority Education
Teachers College, Columbia University**

**July 2002
EDO-UD-02-3
ISSN 0889-8049**

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CITY AND STATE TAKEOVER AS A SCHOOL REFORM STRATEGY

City and state takeover of public school systems has gained prominence as a school reform strategy. Twenty-four states allow takeovers of local school districts, permitting state officials or city hall to exert authority over a district in the case of "academic bankruptcy" or woefully low-performing schools. To date, school district takeovers have occurred in 18 states and the District of Columbia (Wong & Shen, 2001). The Federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 also identifies takeover as a strategy to turn around schools with years of low performance. In light of the growing interest in takeover reform, it is important to know whether school district takeover can work. This digest therefore addresses this reform strategy by outlining the emergence of takeover over the past decade, discussing the promises and limitations that takeover offers, and synthesizing the research to date on takeover's effectiveness.

The Expanding Size and Scope of Takeover

A notable education trend over the past decade is greater implementation of takeover reform, with a peak of takeovers occurring during a three-year period from 1995 to 1997. Thirty-eight percent of takeovers (15 of 40) occurred during these three years, including the highly publicized takeovers in Chicago (1995), Cleveland (1997), and Baltimore (1997). Further, takeovers have broadened in scope. Prior to the 1995-97 peak, 60 percent of the takeovers were for purely financial and/or management reasons, while only 27 percent were comprehensive takeovers that included academic goals. In the three years after 1997, however, the percentage of comprehensive takeovers has risen to 67 percent.

The duration of the takeover varies in terms of the scope of the intervention. Those limited to nonacademic issues have generally lasted for a shorter period of time. The overwhelming majority (10 of 14) of completed takeovers—where local control has been reestablished—are takeovers that do not involve academic reform. Only four of the 23 takeovers involving academic goals have been completed. The rest remain in progress, and may remain in progress for a long time.

Comprehensive takeovers, which include financial, managerial, and academic components, last the longest. Only one of the comprehensive takeovers, in Logan County, West Virginia, has been completed. The remaining comprehensive takeovers are still in effect, and seven of the 14 have been in place for more than five years.

Promises and Limitations of Takeover Reform

Like other major educational reforms, city/state takeover of a school district suggests both promises and limitations. On the one hand, the takeover strategy has the potential to turn around low-performing schools and districts. Takeover reform looks different in each school district where it has been imple-

mented, but all takeover reforms focus on district-level capacity to reduce institutional fragmentation and raise academic accountability. This kind of systemwide restructuring is based on several organizational principles which:

- recognize that the existing political structures are not easily alterable;
- empower the district and state level administration to intervene in failing schools;
- enable the state or city to manage conflicting interests and reduce fragmentary rules; and
- integrate political accountability and educational performance standards at the systemwide level (Wong, 1999).

If these principles become reality, takeover initiatives can hold schools and students accountable to systemwide standards. To restore public trust, takeover reform maintains a strong focus on low-performing schools and students, including allocating additional resources to those schools. Takeover reform also recruits nontraditional leaders to top management positions in order to change existing organizational practices and culture.

While the promises of takeover reform make it an attractive option, there are also serious challenges to takeover success. Many of them are rooted in the potentially confrontational relationship between the city (or state) and the school system. Takeover initiatives are often viewed by professional educators as an infringement of their professional autonomy. Mayor- or state-appointed administrators may lack expertise on instructional and curriculum issues. Too often, takeover reform pays primary attention to standardized test achievement as the most important measure of school improvement. There have also been questions raised about the role of race in determining the takeover of districts (Reinhard, 1998).

Research on Effectiveness of City/State Takeover as a Reform Strategy

While research within single school districts has been extensive, research across takeover sites has lagged behind the pace of policy and practice (Ziebarth, 2001). Most studies have been fairly focused in scope, but they do suggest that it is far easier to fix district-level finances and management practices than it is to make a dent in student achievement (Seder, 2000). One study of state takeovers emphasized that successful districts should "align the local curriculum with state standards and tests" (Bushweller, 1998, p. 6). This study also suggested that low administrative turnover and open communication with the community are keys to improvement.

There is a need for more research that synthesizes find-

ings from across takeover districts and identifies the circumstances in which takeover succeeds or fails. One emerging strand of more systematic research is Wong and Shen's (2001) examination of 14 school districts where comprehensive takeovers are currently in place. The districts fall into two categories: eight city (mayoral) takeovers in Chicago, Boston, Cleveland, Baltimore, Detroit, Washington, DC, Oakland, and Harrisburg; and six state takeovers in Compton, California; Hartford, Connecticut; Lawrence, Massachusetts; and Newark, Jersey City, and Paterson, New Jersey. Wong and Shen examine the potential of takeover reform to impact three distinct aspects of the school district: (1) higher quality teacher and student performance, especially in the lowest performing schools; (2) more effective financial and administrative management; and (3) increased accountability in order to improve public perception of the school district.

Takeover and Achievement. It is important to consider a variety of school-level performance measures. The findings from school-level analysis in Boston, Chicago, Lawrence, and Compton lead to four broad conclusions regarding the relationship between academic performance and school district takeover: (1) mayoral takeover is linked to increases in student achievement at the elementary grades; (2) gains in achievement are especially large for the lowest performing schools, suggesting that mayoral takeovers involve a special focus on these failing schools; (3) mayoral takeover seems less effective for the upper grades, where the cumulative effects of many years of poor schooling are not easily reversible; and (4) student achievement suffers when state takeovers produce administrative and political turmoil. After a period of adjustment, however, state takeovers may also be able to produce positive achievement gains (Wong & Shen, 2001).

Takeover and Management. Looking at the change in per pupil expenditures (PPE), the Wong and Shen (2001) analysis suggests that resource reallocation follows mayoral control. Their analysis shows an infusion of non-teacher administrators to management, suggesting that a more diversified management team is being put in place to run the school district.

Takeover and Accountability. Looking at the types of tests that districts give to their students, two trends are evident. First, all the comprehensive takeover districts are in states that administer content-standards assessments. Although the states vary in the number of grades they test, it is clear that all of the states where takeovers have occurred are concerned with measuring student performance against state-defined standards. The second finding, however, is that in the mayoral takeover districts, a strong emphasis is also placed on additional tests administered by the local authorities. The use of these additional measures of evaluation in the mayoral takeover cities may suggest that state standards are not the only benchmark that districts are concerned about meeting.

Conclusion

While it is still too early to know where takeovers will lead—whether to sustained improvement or falling back—the components for success include: clear and attainable goals; working together with the existing administration for a

smooth transition; and making the systemwide leadership (i.e., mayor, superintendent) accountable for performance-based standards and restructuring incentives and sanctions for principals, teachers, and students. The research offers preliminary evidence supporting mayoral takeovers as a reform that can improve failing school districts when these building blocks are in place. Where the state appoints an administrator to control the district, there is a greater chance of political or administrative turmoil.

From a research perspective, the emergence of school district takeover within the integrated governance framework calls for more systematic studies that link district level reform to the school and classroom (Wong & Anagnostopoulos, 1998). What arrangement of integrated governance (i.e., mayoral, state, or some combination) takeover is most effective in improving learning opportunities in the most disadvantaged, inner-city schools? Will the new vision of accountability improve teaching practices? Can the mayor sustain a personal commitment to education in a system of competing constituencies? As school district takeover becomes more frequent, these are the sorts of questions that policy analysts must continue to address.

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The authors would like to acknowledge the research support from the U.S. Department of Education and the Laboratory for Student Success at Temple University.

This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0035. The opinions in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

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